

Opening Statement

Representative Elijah E. Cummings, D-Maryland

Hearing of the Subcommittee on the Federal Workforce and Agency Organization:
“Yucca Mountain Project: Digging for the Truth”

Committee on Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
109th Congress

June 29, 2005 at 10 a.m. in 2154 Rayburn

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for calling this critically important hearing to continue our investigation into the alleged fabrication of scientific data relating to the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste disposal project.

For years, Congress, the President, and the American people have relied in good faith on the Department of Energy (DOE) to provide an objective scientific evaluation of the suitability of Yucca Mountain to function as a nuclear waste repository. In 2002, despite some reservations, Congress voted to support the President’s recommendation to approve the Yucca Mountain Project. Congressional approval was ultimately based upon what we believed was sound science demonstrating that a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain would be both safe and effective.

Unfortunately, this Committee obtained documents that seem to indicate the scientific foundation behind the Yucca Mountain Project may have been falsified. Specifically, the emails in question relate to computer modeling in water infiltration and climate studies. However, before we draw any conclusions of our own it is important that we permit a thorough and fair investigation, and accurately assess the context of the documents we reviewed. All citizens be they federal employees or otherwise deserve to be considered innocent until proven guilty.

With that said, it is important that we get to the bottom of these emails. Experts indicate that water infiltration is a central consideration in determining the overall safety of a potential nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain. Water permeation at the repository site could corrode containers holding nuclear waste resulting in radioactive leakage.

Mr. Chairman, we must demand that any investigation into this matter distinguishes between those scientists who potentially falsified data and those scientists who were potentially conveying a sense of dissatisfaction with the Yucca Mountain Project in the emails at issue. We owe it to the American people to be thorough in this investigation,

we owe it to our democratic principles to be just, and we especially owe our due diligence to the citizens of Nevada who may be most adversely affected by Yucca Mountain's nuclear waste.

I yield back the balance of my time and look forward to the testimony of today's witnesses.

Questions:

Panel I (Please note there is only one panel):

W. John Arthur, III, Deputy Director, Office of Repository Development, Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, Department of Energy

Joseph Hevesi, Scientist, U.S. Geological Survey, Department of Interior

1. Mr. Hevesi, you developed a water infiltration model for Yucca Mountain and found that more water flowed through the mountain than was reflected in the DOE's early models. Can you explain this discrepancy between your findings and the DOE's?
2. Mr. Hevesi, can you describe the Yucca Mountain Project's workplace culture? Specifically, did frustration or dissatisfaction with the Yucca Mountain Project impact the scientific analysis being performed by U.S. Geological Survey employees?

Follow-up: If so, to what extent can this explain the emails we've received that seem to indicate deliberate falsification of data?

3. Mr. Arthur, Mr. Hevesi, in clear and plain terms, is Yucca Mountain a suitable site to function as a nuclear waste repository?